The
Pagan
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Modern Paganism

Questions & Answers

The Committee for Religious Freedom, Salt Lake City, Utah

To promote community harmony and freedom of religious practice.

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Contemporary society is experiencing a resurgence of interest in earth- and nature-centered spirituality. Modern Paganism is a rich and diverse religious movement drawing the attention of the media, law-makers, and spiritual seekers. This pamphlet attempts to answer some of the questions frequently asked about modern Pagan beliefs and practices.

What Is Paganism?

The term "Pagan" comes from a Latin word for "country dweller" first used in early Christian times to refer to those not yet converted to Christianity. "Pagan" was an epithet that cast aspersions on those not seen as "true believers." Today, it refers more general to the faith of those whose spiritual center is drawn to native and natural religions, usually pantheistic or polytheistic, and almost always earth-centered.

What Then Is "Modern Paganism"?

Modern Paganism, or Neo-Paganism, is a modern, Earth-centered religious perspective which borrows and adapts from pre-Christian paganism as well as from contemporary religious thought. While reconnecting with ancient wisdom, it speaks eloquently to the needs and concerns of the present.

What Is Meant By "The Old Religion"?

The term describes the pre-Christian religion of much of western and northern Europe, which was based on the agricultural cycles and other natural rhythms of the Earth. It coexisted with Christianity for centuries, from the so-called "Dark Ages" up until the Inquisition and the "Burning Times" (witch hunts) of the late Middle Ages. It also can refer more generally to other native and tribal religions of the world.

What Is The Difference Between Paganism And Witchcraft?

Some contemporary Pagans call themselves Witches. The term has many meanings, some carrying rather heavy negative baggage. "Witchcraft" or "The Craft" is most properly applied to three broad categories: Descendants of the European witches of the Middle Ages, practitioners of the "reconstructed" Witchcraft of the 20th century, and "feminist Witches" whose religion and politics center in the contemporary women's' spirituality movement. It can generally be said that all modern Witches are Pagans, but not all modern Pagans are Witches. At least one writer, Aidan Kelly, has begun to use the term "Neo-Pagan Witchcraft" to describe the largest portion of the contemporary Pagan community.

What Is Meant By The Term "Wicca"?

Often used as a synonym for Witchcraft, "Wicca" is thought to derive from an Anglo-Saxon root meaning to bend or to turn. It is more properly applied only to those Witchcraft traditions which originated in or derive from practices in the British Isles.

What About Shamanism?

Shamanism is not a religion, but a set of spiritual techniques used for healing and the acquisition of knowledge through forays into non-ordinary states of consciousness. Now gaining increasing attention in the counseling profession, this journeying is usually aided by sonic driving (such as repetitive drumming or chanting) and often involves interactions with totemic and archetypal figures. These techniques are used in virtually every tribal society and are widely used by contemporary Pagans.

What Do Modern Pagans Believe?

The central beliefs of modern Pagans differ in specifics yet share many fundamentals. Deity is seen as immanent rather than transcendent. Experience is preferred over doctrine. It is believed that there are and should be multiple paths to the Divine. There is no prescribed creed, but there are a number of beliefs shared by most contemporary Pagans, summarized at the end of this pamphlet.

Isn't This Just Humanism By Another Name?

No and Yes. Like religious Humanists, modern Pagans have a love and reverence for this world and the physical plane generally. The rational is seen as important. Great emphasis is also placed on the intuitive, however, and the belief that the physical and non-physical worlds are equally real, and are interconnected, interpenetrating manifestations of nature. This means that spiritual work, whether called meditation, prayer, or magic, and whether done as ritual, worship, or celebration, is efficacious and can result in changes in the physical world. The majority of Pagans also believe in the survival of the consciousness or soul after physical death.

How Do Modern Pagans Worship?

Some groups have formal worship services or similar group meetings. Others conduct rituals that have varying degrees of set forms. Some Pagans worship by themselves without formal ritual. Most contemporary Pagans hold rituals corresponding to the turning of the seasons and the phases of the moon. Rituals are often performed in a sacred space defined by the demarcation of a circle, within which the celebration and worship take place. Celebrations include eight major seasonal holidays, sometimes collectively referred to as "Sabbats". These Sabbats, as most frequently observed by North American and European Pagans, follow the agricultural cycles of the northern temperate zone, and include the solstices and equinoxes as well as four intermediate festivals which fall in between, sometimes called "cross-quarters," on or near the first days of February, May, August, and November. Regular public Sabbat rituals, reflecting a variety of contemporary Pagan styles, are held in many communities. Rituals may include meditation, chanting, drumming, myth- and story-telling, ritual drama, dance, and so on. Deeper ritual work is most often practiced at private gatherings, which for many traditions coincide with the phases of the moon. The work may include more intense raising of energy, healing work, and personal spiritual development.

What About Satanism?

Contrary to the claims of ill-informed Christian fundamentalists, the practices of modern Pagans are in no way related to Satanism. Most Pagans do not even believe Satan exists. As a profanation of Christian symbolism, Satan worship is a Christian heresy, not a Pagan religion.

Do Pagans Proselytize?

No, Pagans do not proselytize. Most modern Pagan traditions do welcome newcomers. Most modern Pagans also do not discourage other Pagans from integrating other religious and spiritual practices and beliefs into their practice.

What Contemporary Pagans Believe

While there is no set of beliefs shared by all Pagans, most would agree that similarities far outweigh differences. There are a number of beliefs held by the vast majority of modern Pagans. Some of these are:

1. Divinity is seen as immanent.
2. Divinity is as likely to manifest itself in female as male form, the God or the Goddess, in the interconnectedness of all life.
3. Multiple paths to the divine exist, as symbolized by many goddesses and gods. These are often seen as archetypes or gateways to the unconscious.
4. We respect and love Mother Earth as a living being, Gaia, of which we are a part.
5. The physical world, as an emanation of the divine, is good and to be enjoyed by all living beings in love and harmony.
6. Ethics and morality are based on avoidance of harm to other beings, including Earth as a whole, which mandates environmental activism as a spiritual responsibility.
7. Human interdependence implies the need for community cooperation.
8. The solar and lunar cycles and the cycles of our lives are celebrated. This leads to the maintenance and revival of old customs and the creation of new ones.
9. A strong commitment to personal and planetary growth, evolution, and balance are vital.
10. One's lifestyle must be consistent with one's beliefs. The personal is political.
11. A minimum of dogma and a maximum of individual responsibility in all things are goals to strive for. Thus a healthy skepticism is to be fostered, and ideas are not to be accepted without personal investigation of their validity.
12. Messiahs and gurus are to be avoided. The mediation of another being is unnecessary for an individual to commune with Deity. Power-from-within is preferred to power-over.

13. All beings are personal emanations of the Divine. Thou art Goddess, thou art God.

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